



Graduates from the Energy Systems Technology and Education Center (ESTEC), an energy-technician education and training program, have the tools they need to land jobs in a tough economy.

Energy training pays off for recent graduates

By [Ryan Weeks](#), INL Communications and Governmental Affairs

In this tough economy, many college graduates are struggling to find full-time jobs that pay top wages. Graduates from the [Energy Systems Technology and Education Center](#) (ESTEC), an energy-technician education and training program started by Idaho State University's College of Technology with Idaho National Laboratory and [Partners for Prosperity](#), are bucking that trend.

ESTEC students are not only landing jobs — the program had a 92 percent placement rate as of November — they're getting well-paying ones. Their average starting salary ranges from \$50,000 to \$75,000 per year.

"ESTEC is an initiative that has exceeded our wildest expectations," said Richard Holman, deputy director of ESTEC and INL manager of Energy Workforce Initiatives.

The center was created, with significant support from INL, to address the growing need for technicians within the U.S. energy sector. With help from the nonprofit group Partners for Prosperity, the program is finding recruits among displaced workers, homemakers, single parents, unemployed or underemployed individuals, under-represented populations, and workers from declining industries.



[ESTEC](#) is a partnership between ISU's College of Technology, Idaho National Laboratory, and [Partners for Prosperity](#).



Instrumentation and Controls Engineering Technology student Bonnie Fields works on wiring a Programmable Logic Controller during her final semester.

"We especially wanted to change the face of the energy market sector by increasing the diversity of candidates going into energy careers," said Holman. "The involvement of Partners for Prosperity has been instrumental to our success in that regard."

Many ESTEC students have worked in fields that have suffered significant layoffs or offer limited advancement opportunities. The average ESTEC student is returning for a two-year Associate of Applied Science degree after at least a five-year absence from school.

Such was the case with Rana Jones.

Jones enrolled at ESTEC in the spring of 2008. She had earned a bachelor's degree in communications and worked in television and radio for several years. Her career was a "one-man show" that required early mornings and late nights without the benefits of a decent paycheck.

Jones eventually left the radio and television industry and dabbled in a family business and in real estate, but was ready to find an interesting career with a good salary. That opportunity came while she was helping her parents paint their house.

One of the neighbors, who happened to be an energy systems instructor at ISU, told her about the program. It piqued her interest enough that she toured the ESTEC facility in Pocatello and was impressed by the state-of-the-art equipment.

Jones registered at ESTEC and started on a path to a new career.

"This was completely different from any education I'd had before," she said.

Jones graduated in December with a degree in Energy Systems Instrumentation and Controls. She is now interviewing for a position within the energy sector and hopes her new training will guarantee her the life — and security — communications could not offer.

ESTEC by the numbers

92%

ESTEC's placement rate from August 2007 to November 2009

33

Number of students who have graduated to date with an associate's degree in energy systems instrumentation and control

"Careerwise, the energy industry offers a lot of rewarding benefits," she said.

The ESTEC program is a heavily hands-on, laboratory approach to instruction. Students graduating from the ESTEC programs have actually worked on the equipment that they will be responsible for in industry.

To date, ESTEC has graduated 33 students with Associate of Applied Science degrees. The program is expected to expand again in the fall, which is good news for the six people already on its waiting list.

The U.S. Department of Energy, through a [Nuclear Energy University Programs](#) grant, has provided funding to start a new Nuclear Operations Technician program. The program may be accepting enrollees as early as fall of 2010.

ESTEC has also recently received \$1.5 million through a federal green jobs grant program sponsored by the [U.S. Department of Labor](#) to develop a nine-month renewable energy technician program.



Electrical Engineering Technology student Britnee Titlow works on a motor controller during her third semester.

Students can begin enrolling in the new renewable energy program in 2011. Those who complete the program will be certified as renewable energy technicians and, with additional classes, they can receive a degree in wind engineering or mechanical engineering technology.

They also have the option to pursue a Bachelor of Applied Science degree.

The new degrees will make it possible for even more students to earn the two-year Applied Science degrees and qualify for jobs in an expanding energy industry.

"These jobs are in demand and it takes half the time and half the expenses," said Jones.

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engineering technology

9

Number of students who graduated from ESTEC in December 2009

\$27

Average per-hour starting salary for ESTEC graduates

4

The number of degrees ESTEC currently offers: energy systems mechanical engineering technology, energy systems wind engineering technology, energy systems electrical engineering technology, energy systems instrumentation and control engineering technology.